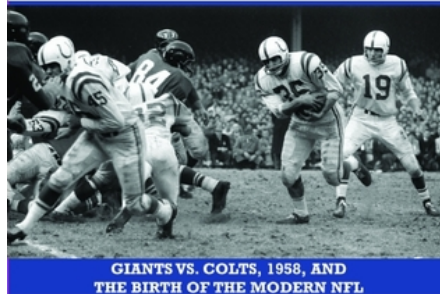


THE BEST GAME EVER



GIANTS VS. COLTS, 1958, AND
THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN NFL

MARK BOWDEN

AUTHOR OF BLACK HAWK DOWN

The Best Game Ever: Giants vs. Colts, 1958, and the Birth of the Modern NFL

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On December 28, 1958, the New York Giants and Baltimore Colts met under the lights of Yankee Stadium for the NFL Championship game. Played in front of sixty-four thousand fans and millions of television viewers around the country, the game would be remembered as the greatest in football history. On the field and roaming the sidelines were seventeen future Hall of Famers, including Colts stars Johnny Unitas, Raymond Berry, and Gino Marchetti, and Giants greats Frank Gifford, Sam Huff, and assistant coaches Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry. An estimated forty-five million viewers—at that time the largest crowd to have ever watched a football game—tuned in to see what would become the first sudden-death contest in NFL history. It was a battle of the league's best offense—the Colts—versus its best defense—the Giants. And it was a contest between the blue-collar Baltimore team versus the glamour boys of the Giants squad. *The Best Game Ever* is a brilliant portrait of how a single game changed the history of American sport. Published to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the championship, it is destined to be a sports classic.

The Best Game Ever: Giants vs. Colts, 1958, and the Birth of the Modern NFL Details

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From Reader Review The Best Game Ever: Giants vs. Colts, 1958, and the Birth of the Modern NFL for online ebook

Dennis McClure says

Understand up front. I'm not a particular fan of football. I've nothing against it. I'm just not very interested. So how did I choose this book?

I have a rule. If certain people in my life suggest a book, I read it.

That said, football fan or not, I found this mid fifties history of the league, the Giants, and the Colts absolutely fascinating. That's got to be the writer's achievement. He subtly weaves a portrait of America in the fifties through his football plot. And it just pulls you in.

I highly recommend it to anyone who loves good writing and history.

J.C. says

Highly recommended to all NE Patriots fans right now. Atlanta fans can skip it for sure (sorry y'all).

Did you know that the last time there was a Professional Football Championship decided by sudden death overtime was this game in 1958? Did you know that before that there was no sudden death overtimes at all and if the last game of the season ended in a tie then no champion was declared?

Just wanted to put that out there.

The book was a pretty good read, but not great. I was going to say 2 1/2 stars but decided to give it an extra half a star because the parallels between this game and Super Bowl LI were just too delicious to ignore.

There is a book by Tom Callahan called Johnny U that is much more detailed and entertaining if you are interested in this stuff.

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/4...>

Paul Haspel says

The best thing, for me, about this recounting of the historic 1958 NFL championship game between the Baltimore Colts and the New York Giants is the sheer quality of the writing. The game, the first overtime championship game in the history of the National Football League, was so full of suspenseful twists and turns that it is still known as "The Greatest Game Ever Played"; and therefore, it is no surprise that a number of writers have turned their attention to it. But Mark Bowden is such a skilled writer, achieving such heights of prose poetry through the sheer craftsmanship of his language, that this particular retelling of the historic game truly stands out.

In *The Best Game Ever*, Mark Bowden sets the 1958 NFL championship game in the context of its time quite effectively. It helped, to be sure, that the Colts and Giants played tenaciously in a tough game characterized by many dramatic changes in momentum. But as Bowden makes clear, there were historical and cultural factors converging to create a social milieu in which professional football could become the wildly popular phenomenon it became. Bowden suggests, persuasively, that the post-World War II affluence of the suburbanizing 1950's

"...would prompt sweeping social change....One part of this new America would be an explosion in the attraction of spectator sports. Games had long been popular, but they were about to start generating wealth beyond even the most ambitious imagination, particularly in football. There was a unique confluence of trends. A vast market was forming for pro games just as the technology was being perfected to package and deliver them to every home" (p. 50).

It is against that background of technological advancement that Bowden's saga of *Giants vs. Colts, 1958, and the Birth of the Modern NFL* (the book's subtitle) unfolds. Along with those advancements in technology, the game was changing, becoming a faster-moving and more cerebral game. Responding to those tactical changes in the game, and indeed speeding them along, were innovative thinkers like Giants defensive coach Tom Landry, who believed that a strong response to a faster, more short-pass-oriented game would be reducing the number of linebackers from the then-current four to three – a set-up in which everything depended on "the man in the center, the middle linebacker. He would have to be a kind of superathlete, a man as big as a lineman, quick enough and fast enough to play pass defense, and smart enough to recognize which role to play with every snap of the ball" (p. 100).

Fortunately for Landry, he had in mind the perfect candidate for this superathlete position – Sam Huff, a Giants defender who so perfectly personified the rough-and-tumble qualities of 1950's pro football that he had been the subject of a CBS television special, "The Violent World of Sam Huff." After some initial hesitation regarding Landry's suggestion of a change in roles, "Huff stepped into the role in practice, and it was a revelation. He felt like he had found the position he was born to play....Now he was standing upright at the center of the line, and he was amazed at how much more he could suddenly see. It was as though he had played the game his whole life with blinders on, and now they were gone. With his peripheral vision, he could see the whole field, from sideline to sideline" (pp. 101-02). *The Best Game Ever* captures well the excitement and drama of these changes; the game is getting faster and more interesting, just in time for the new technology to beam it out to a nation that will fall in love with it.

I also appreciated Bowden's willingness to demythologize this mythic game, as when he writes that the early stages of the 1958 NFL championship "looked more like amateur hour than the NFL championship. Three of the first four drives had ended with turnovers" (p. 151).

As the game went on, however, both teams settled into their routines of doing what they did best – the Colts on offense, and the Giants on defense. And one player in particular – the Baltimore Colts' quarterback, a skinny and awkward-looking Pennsylvania native with number 19 on his jersey – took command of the game. Johnny Unitas, mixing a few runs up the middle with a great many passes to his amazingly reliable wide receiver Raymond Berry, had taken the Giants off their game; and "When an offense was clicking the way the Colts were, even the most disciplined defense begins to crumble" (p. 200).

Sam Huff knew only too well what Unitas had done on that decisive drive; almost half a century later, he told an interviewer, "John had me psyched, you know? I thought he could read my mind after a while because it seemed like the son of a bitch knew every defense I was in. You know, it was frustrating to play against him, he was just a mastermind at it" (p. 202). As Bowden chronicles it, the Colts' game-winning play

that ended that drive and the championship game – running back Alan Ameche plowing through an improbably large hole in the Giants’ defensive line and crashing across the goal line – was an almost mathematically certain outcome of Unitas’ mastery of the game.

Bowden, a prolific and best-selling author, is probably best-known for torn-from-today’s-headlines books like *Black Hawk Down*; his suspenseful 1999 chronicling of the travails of a group of U.S. soldiers caught behind enemy lines in Somalia was adapted for the big screen by director Ridley Scott in 2001. Why then did Bowden turn to the subject of a football game that took place when Bowden himself was just seven years old? Bowden states that “I had grown up for the latter part of my childhood in Baltimore, and remembered the great Colts teams and players” (p. 261). And he sounds like a true Baltimorean when he praises “the special relationship between the city and the team”, and laments “Robert Irsay’s unforgivable decision to ship the franchise to Indianapolis” (p. 264). “Unforgivable” may seem like a strong word; but you will hear people around Greater Baltimore using that word, and stronger words, when the subject of the Baltimore Colts’ relocation to Indianapolis comes up.

Well-illustrated with photographs from that long-ago time – sixty years gone now – Bowden’s *The Best Game Ever* provides football fans with a direct connection to that distant and stories time when professional football was, for many Americans, something new and exciting.

C Baker says

The Best Game Ever is a fairly good account of what is probably the most famous game in NFL history - the 1958 NFL Championship game where the Baltimore Colts defeated the New York Giants 23-17 in the NFL's first sudden death overtime game. The game pitted some of the greatest players of all time against one another such as Johnny Unitas and Raymond Berry of the Colts, and Frank Gifford and Sam Huff of the Giants. The game also sported three legendary coaches, Vince Lombardi on offense for the Giants, Tom Landry on defense for the Giants, and Weeb Ewbank, head coach of Baltimore who went on to win another seminal NFL Championship when his New York Jets upset his former team, the Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III.

As most who follow football closely know, this game is considered the launching point of the modern NFL because it occurred in the early years of television and at least the last part of the game was seen by an estimated 30 million people. After this game the popularity of professional football took off, particularly because the action is well suited for television viewing.

This book tells the story of the game mostly from the players' perspective, focusing somewhat more on the Baltimore Colts, particularly Johnny Unitas and Raymond Berry, who both had phenomenal performances in this game. But it also tells the story of other key players on both sides of the ball to greater or lesser degrees. It does a less stellar job of building the drama of the game, maybe because we already know the outcome. But overall it completely documents the game and the key turning points that lead to the eventual outcome, including Frank Gifford not making a first down on third and short that would have allowed the Giants to run out the clock to win the game, and the Unitas to Barry connection on an improvised play for a first down on the final drive in regulation to tie the game.

For a football fan this is certainly an enjoyable book and provides some insight into the game and the players, particularly Raymond Berry who gets the most coverage. While I wouldn't classify this as The Best Football Book Ever, it is well done and worth reading.

Michael says

The 1958 NFL championship game between the New York Giants and the Baltimore Colts is one of those games that sports legends are built around. Billed as "the best game ever," it was the moment when a multitude of factors came together to give birth to the most popular sport in the world, the NFL.

Unfortunately, footage of the game is lost to the ravages of time.

That only makes Mark Bowden's account of the game more compelling and extraordinary. Bowden interviews players who played in the game, coaches and staffs as well as looking at the unique series of factors that led to the crossroads in history. Bowden puts you in the action, making you feel like you're there, watching the game unfold or even playing the game. The story of the strategy, the hopes, the dreams and the game itself will keep you turning the pages. Even if you're not a football fan, you'll find something intriguing about this account of events.

Wes says

So there I am, cruising along when I see this book just kind of sitting there. As I am a sucker for the printed word, I thought "Hey Mark Bowden, I know him." and took the book along with me. Then I cracked the first page.

You don't have to be a huge football fan to appreciate what Bowden put together on football and the Giant Vs Colts game of 1958. He tells the story of the game so well that you find yourself blitzing through the book, and double checking who won on Wikipedia while you're at it. Bowden also has a gift and natural ability to weave the many other smaller, but no less important, stories of the men, the evolving game, and all the technological shifts that helped make Football the game that it is today.

A fast, fun, and very enjoyable book, certainly for sports fans, but great for journalism fans as well.

Jeremy Perron says

This book is not about one game, despite its title, rather it is about the world in which the game was played. It is played in Dwight D. Eisenhower's America where people are discussing sputnik and the Rosenbergs. Where if you were a black player, playing for the Baltimore Colts, you had to play in a city that was segregated. The modern Civil Rights Movement, which would lead to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was just getting started, but in this place that still seemed too far away.

In the 1950s baseball is the national pass time and basketball is in second with the Boston Celtics of Bill Russell being totally dominant. Football was not really new, it had been around for over half a century, but it was still evolving. The book captures this evolution and those who had made it so. Coaches, players and commissioners, all who had a hand in creating the modern game are featured in this book. The two personalities that stand out the most are Johnny Unitas and Raymond Berry.

This Championship game would be played at Yankee stadium because the Giants were not important enough to get there own stadium. It would be the first ever NFL game to go into overtime. The two teams were the Giants and the Colts, who as a Patriots fan I despise both making it in some ways a difficult book for me. Nevertheless I would highly recommend this book to anyone who would like to know more about this era in the history of football.

Steve says

Mark Bowden can certainly tell a story.

Subtitled “Giants Vs Colts, 1958, and the birth of the Modern NFL,” this book is all that and then some. Like his previous effort *Black Hawk Down*, Bowden pulls together a number of different but related threads and weaves a cliffhanger.

Even though the outcome is known, Bowden does a fabulous job of showing the interplay of ideas and personalities that would shape this championship game and the league from that point on.

Just the names involved is enough to turn heads: Unitas, Berry, Lombardi, Grier, Grifford (yes, the same one), Landry, Ameche, Ewbank, Summner, Donovan, Shaw, Huff, Howell, Marchetti. It’s often forgotten that Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry were once coaches on the same team (New York Giants) at the same time before they went off to create dynasties.

It was a clash of two teams at their best from opposite sides of the economic and cultural divide with legendary rosters and classic coaching. It was the first prime time televised night game, the first game to ever go into sudden death overtime (some players didn’t know what it was and began leaving the field) and the first one to create superstars out of players.

For me, the most revealing passages are those where Bowden describes the game at the beginning of the third quarter. The lights are on but only on the field; the crowd is in the dark. Parts of the field are beginning to ice over. The players on both sidelines are wrapped in hooded robes, their breath visible in the light and looking like something out of the middle ages rather than the mid-twentieth century. You can almost see it.

Bowden reveals the little things (a coach hitting an opposing team’s player for a tackle that was too rough, the TV broadcast going down at a critical time and the NBC staffer who decided to act drunk running around on the field to delay the game until the techs could fix the problem) that make the game real and the players people you might have known.

As a postscript, in a recent issue of *The Atlantic*, Bowden shows the film of the game to Andy Reid, the current head coach of the Philadelphia Eagles, to get his take. In 1958, professional football players had to hold down real jobs (the sport was just that; a part-time hobby) and were not conditioned from birth to specialized positions. They were well-rounded athletes that would have been pounded by the physical mass of today’s players.

And, in 1958, TV was a spectator. Nowadays, coaches and players use commercial breaks as times to regroup. Back then, formations were done fast and the best players called the plays while in the game and not the coaches.

Reid said that few of the players then could have survived today, but they were good at figuring out the other team on the field and this ability to think for themselves is what made the game great. The unexpected change-ups and strategic shifts made a great impression on the modern coach.

Though I did play in high school, I confess to not being a major football fan. However, I know enough of the game to get the brilliance that unfolded in 1958. Even if you're not a fan, the writing will sweep you off to Yankee Stadium on a cold December night.

Steve Rabideau says

Really enjoyed this book. If you are an NFL fan/historian you should do yourself a favor and read about the 1958 Championship game. This is really the birth of the modern NFL. There are multiple books on this game and although this is the only one I've read, I would recommend it. Lots of interesting facts on the era and it is pretty wild to see how far the league has come since then. Would have been a quick read if I'd have had more time.

Nooilforpacifists says

Adequate, short book, about the Giants vs Colts 1958 NFL Championship game, the first to go into sudden death overtime, the game that affixed football as the made-for-TV sport, and (it still is said) the greatest game ever played.

K says

There are a lot of better sports books, football books, and even books about this particular game. This book is okay, but suffers from some strange writing and a bit of amateurish knowledge about football. It's also not really passionate about the game in general or the particular game that it covers, even though it tries to make the point that the game was all about passion.

First, the basics. On December 28, 1958, the Baltimore Colts played the New York Giants for the National Football League championship. This was about a decade before the Super Bowl was created. The Colts won a thrilling game in overtime, and it's considered one of the greatest football games ever. It's also the most influential football game ever because it was both exciting and the first highly watched game across the country, due to the rising prevalence of TV sets in homes and bars. A direct path can be charted from that game to the massive hype machine that is pro football today.

Author Mark Bowden gives some background and perspective on football leading up to that pivotal year and date. It's amazing that players had off-the-field jobs -- some of them during the season (like selling insurance) -- because football rarely paid more than \$10,000 per year. Average salaries were half of that. Few players trained outside of the season, and even during the schedule, everybody drank lots of beer. A guy could play on the defensive line at 230-240 lbs., though some linemen were much bigger.

Things were starting to change. The game was getting more sophisticated on the field and more popular off the field. And the book does a good job of profiling how Raymond Berry, star receiver for the Colts, was leading the way. Berry was less physically talented than most receivers, at least as far as size, speed and eyesight goes (he wore contact lenses, which were very unusual at the time). But by studying how to play the game, how to make moves to get open, and which moves would work best against which opponents, he made himself into a star. Berry's example would become the norm in a couple of decades, but at the time he was simply seen as weird and obsessive.

Berry caught passes from Johnny Unitas, the greatest quarterback of his era. But Unitas, too, was not a guaranteed success in pro football. He'd been dropped by his first team, the Pittsburgh Steelers, and played semi-professional football for a year before getting his last chance with the Colts. Like Berry, he worked relentlessly to get everything just right. And while he had fantastic arm strength, he was one of the least mobile quarterbacks of his era, at a time when QBs still ran the ball often. Again, the description of Unitas is good and not overdone -- there are full books on him for those really curious.

So, the ultra-serious Unitas and Berry led a team that was mostly made up of goofballs and jokers -- guys like Artie Donovan. They were serious about football, but also about having a good time in the locker room and outside the stadium. The author doesn't dwell on it too much, but has a few well-chosen anecdotes, especially charming ones about owner Carroll Rosenbloom, who gave players downpayments for homes, set them up in businesses, and basically tried to treat them like family. As a team, the Colts were rising, well, like young Colts; it was their 2nd consecutive season with a 9-3 record.

Their opponents, the NY Giants, had been among the best teams in football for the last 5-6 years. They had stars, especially on defense, and pretty boys on offense. The Giants were arrogant, but they played hard, too. Nobody played harder or dirtier than Robert E. Lee "Sam" Huff, their ferocious middle linebacker. As the author explains, Huff revolutionized the linebacker position in a defense created by Tom Landry. The gist of it was to have the lineman neutralize their men, and have the linebackers see the play and bust it up. If it was a pass, the linebackers had to recognize that and get back on pass defense. It took speed and smarts, as well as brute strength. And when it worked, those Giants (or later Steelers or Bears teams) were very tough to beat.

So, the teams meet -- league's best offense vs. its best defense. The author pulls out the inevitable cliché of "irresistible force meets immovable object." And yet, the game was sloppy. Seven or 8 fumbles. Missed field goals. Quarterbacks getting sacked. And so on. But as the game continued, and as it got darker and colder, it became a test of wills that gripped the attention of everyone who saw it. And when the Colts won with a late field goal and then a touchdown in overtime, it was something that nobody had ever seen before. And the rest is history.

So why don't I love the book? First, it's a bit flat in parts, as noted already. He doesn't maximize the drama of the game, though he has some nice phrases to set the scene. Second, the author has some weird ticks. Like he uses first names for the Colts players "Raymond," "John" and coach "Weeb" Ewbanks. But he uses last names for the Giants: "Gifford," "Huff" and "Connerly." Why? Third, he repeats a number of things about the game that don't need to be repeated, and he pulls in other things that seem irrelevant, like a 16-year-old kid who got a well-known photo of the winning touchdown -- but so what? Fourth, he makes what I consider to be a few elementary mistakes about football. The one I can remember best is that he refers to one Giants player as sacking the quarterback three or four times "every game." Well, there were 12 games per season then, so that's 36 or more sacks. The pro football record is something like 23, and that's in a 16-game season. And quarterbacks throw twice as often now -- i.e., twice as many sack opportunities. So the claim that some guy had 3 or 4 sacks per game is preposterous, and just sloppy. Maybe the lineman hit the QB that many

times a game, but that's different. The author is precise about other things, like Raymond Berry's study notebooks, so he could be precise about this, too.

Anyway, it's a decent book, but there are other options.

Paul Donahue says

A good book that tells a great story about one of the most fascinating moments in football history.

Before flower websites paid \$3 million for a 30 second ad; before the Black Eyed Peas and a thousand neon dancers pranced and prattled in auto-tune at halftime; before juiced up, ultra fit, millionaire athletes zoomed around in HD inside a Dallas spaceship; the Baltimore Colts and New York Giants made it all possible in 1958. The game is a fascinating microcosm of everything football would become.

I already forgot who the New York coach was, because he was overshadowed by his two top assistants, Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry, who would go on to legendary head coaching careers in Green Bay and Dallas. Around this time, Landry started experimenting with a new defensive wrinkle called the 4-3 (previously, the idea of subtracting a man from the defensive line, giving the offense a one-man advantage in the era of scrum football was unheard of). He placed his star, Sam Huff, at the novel middle linebacker position, who became a terror, revolutionizing defensive strategy.

Whereas the Giants were a top team in a glamorous city, Baltimore had never achieved much in a decidedly blue collar town. At the start of the 1958 season, John Unitas was an unknown back-up recently cut by Pittsburgh. He was soon approached by an equally anonymous receiver named Raymond Berry, who entered camp that year thinking he'd probably get cut. Berry is described by the author as being glaringly unathletic, even by the standards of that era. But he also had a unique and almost neurotic drive to be great in an era in which most players guzzled pizza and beer at the local pub after practices and games.

To the constant amusement of his teammates, Berry practiced. And by a sheer stroke of luck, in August 1958 he had a future Hall of Famer as a backup with time on his hands. For (apparently) the first time ever, a quarterback and receiver worked together on routes and timing, and studied film. After seeing a formation in which a linebacker shifted over to cover the end, they decided if that ever occurred in a game that Berry would forget the called route and run a slant to the now-unoccupied part of the field.

By the time the two teams met in the NFL Championship game in December, Landry's 4-3 was creating havoc and the Unitas-to-Berry combo, now a star tandem, was in an evolutionary groove on offense. This game happened to take place in the exact year in which football's television viewership, and popularity as a whole, was beginning to take off. The ratings for the '58 game would shatter the previous record. And this unprecedented audience found itself watching the Colts, down 7 in the 4th quarter, mount a furious comeback.

With less than two minutes to play, on 3rd and long from their own territory, Raymond Berry split wide in preparation to run an out route. Berry had already obliterated the receiving record in the game, and Tom Landry had had enough -- he sent the linebacker out to cover Berry. With the game on the line, Berry recalled that one film session five months earlier and looked to Unitas lining up under center, wondering if he did too. Vocal audibles had yet to take effect, so Berry took the eye contact from Unitas as an affirmative signal, and ran the slant. The pass hit him in stride for a huge gain (the 3:52 mark here

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCYwY1...>). Considering the way another Colt would run his offense fifty years later, this was like the ape discovering tools in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

The Colts would score and regulation would end in a tie. On top of all that had occurred -- the new offense, the new defense, the new viewership -- it was the first ever sudden death NFL game. The rule was so new, half the players thought the game was over and started trotting into the locker room. The Colts would hold the Giants in OT and score on their first possession, and football would never be the same.

Lombardi, Landry, Unitas, Berry, Huff and many of the other players in that game would become Hall of Famers. Salaries would begin to skyrocket and teams everywhere would start adapting to what the Colts and Giants had introduced to the game. Football would become America's new pastime. And thank God, because I don't know what I'd do without Christina Aguilera butchering our proud anthem, Fergie caterwauling alongside a comatose Slash, Usher doing flips and splits for no reason, and Kim Kardashian, aka "the 2011 Raymond Berry" appearing in the first-ever nationally televised softcore porn episode.

Jill Hutchinson says

If you are a football fan this is a must read. The title says it all.....it probably is the best game ever or at least in the top 5 in modern NFL history. The author, who also wrote *Blackhawk Down*, captures the excitement of the game and the weeks before the championship. He concentrates on several of the players, their backgrounds and personalities.....Johnny Unitas (a "guy next door" type), Raymond Berry (a driven loner), Frank Gifford (a prima donna), Gino Marchetti (a beast on the field), and Art "Fatso" Donovan (an overweight joker who liked a couple of beers before the game).

This was the first game that ever used the "sudden death" rule and many of the players thought that the game had ended in a tie and headed for the locker room. Obviously someone forgot to tell them that this rule was now in effect! You can feel the excitement and disbelief that gripped the crowd as the teams reassembled to continue play.

The author traces the change in training regimes.....most of the huge linemen packed on food, drank beer, played dirty, and smoked at halftime. But players like Unitas and Berry followed a different route which soon became the training model used today. It was indeed the birth of the modern NFL and pro football came into its own and was no longer considered a bunch of ruffians whose objective was to break the limbs of the opposition.

A terrific book, beautifully written. Highly recommended.

Grindy Stone says

Marvelous little read. The 1958 NFL Championship has been beat to death as few other sporting events have, it and Game 6 of the 1975 World Series, but Bowden packs the narrative with dozens of little revelations, even for the hardest core football fan. Well done.

Rick says

Bowden, a one-time beat reporter covering the Eagles in Philadelphia and the author of *Black Hawk Down*, has written a trim and entertaining account of this classic championship game in the days before the Super Bowl, before color TV, before big salaries (rookie professional athletes making less than public school teachers?), and before the nation was pro-football crazy. It was the first pro game to reach “sudden death” overtime—indeed, many of the hall of famers in the game thought the game ended as a tie when the clock ran out in the fourth quarter. (Someone please apologize to Donovan McNabb for not knowing that games could end in a tie if no one scored in regular season overtime.)

Bowden also points out that TV was then like any other spectator at the game, meaning if they cut away to commercial they were no different than a fan going to a concession stand or a bathroom, the play continued without them. The game was played on a bleak winter field. Its action captured for posterity in black and white photography and film. (With just a bit of garish red here and there it could be a Frank Miller film come to life.) It made Johnny Unitas a super star, Raymond Berry a legend, Frank Gifford a whiner (they spotted the ball on his 3rd and short rush wrong; he made the first down which would have allowed the Giants to run out the clock with a three point lead in regulation), and started the cash registers of TV and football convulsing with serial ca-chings! (Players who in 1958 were making between 7-15,000 dollars would be making 200, 300, even 400 grand in less than ten years. The networks began a bidding war that continues today to present live NFL games.) Two of the Giants assistant coaches went on to become legendary head coaches in their own right (Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry.) Several of the personnel from this game also had a role in the next biggest NFL game every played, Super Bowl III, the Jets upset victory over the Colts. Weeb Ewbank coached the Colts in 1958 and the Jets in 1969. Don Maynard and Johnny Sample were role players in the 1958 game but key contributors to the Jets upset in the later game. And the 1958 game’s star, Johnny Unitas, was brought off the bench a decade later in a desperate, near successful attempt at rescuing the heavily favored Colts.

In 1958, the Colts won an heroic match with lots of drama and several reversals of momentum. Bowden describes all of this very well, mixing in anecdotes, background color, and transcripts from the radio broadcast of the game. It’s a great read for any football fan, particularly for any Colts and Giants fans.
